

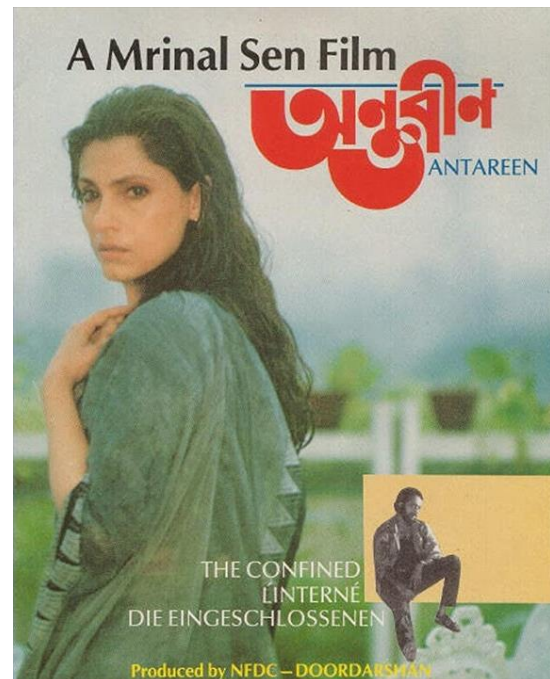
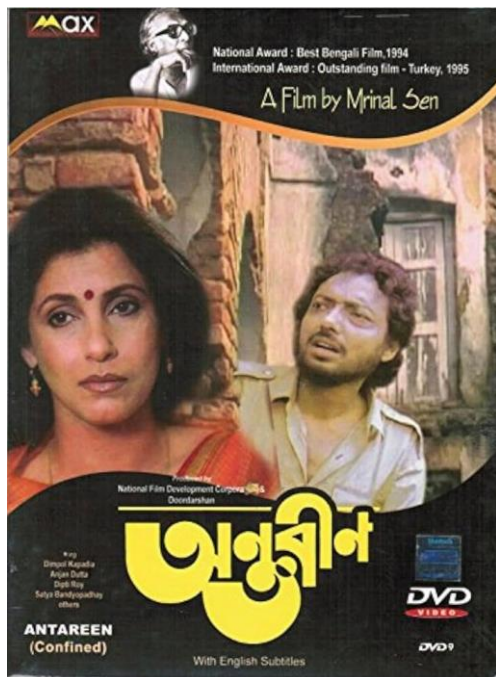
HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CONFINED / ANTAREEN (1993)

Mrinal Sen

Bengali language

Film link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtuLCqKFQJw>



OVERVIEW

Director Mrinal Sen made his first feature film in 1953 but was slow to come into success as his first few films didn't fare well at the box office. Eventually, he tasted both success and controversy with *Baishey Sravan* (*Wedding Day*, 1960) and *Aakash Kusum* (*Up in the Clouds*, 1965). Soon after, *Mr. Bhuvan Shome* (1969), a landmark film, radically altered new cinema and art-house cinema in India. Other films such as *Mrigayaa* (*The Royal Hunt*, 1976) and *Aakaler Sandhane* (*In Search of Famine*, 1980) still retain their impact. Sen won awards at all the major international film festivals, including Cannes, Venice and Berlin. His films usually have a signature shock treatment style that is both cerebral and hard-hitting, coupled with technical jugglery and gimmicks. He was both loved and hated for his uncompromising political stance and critique of the contemporary communist government in West Bengal. Along with Satyajit Ray and Ritwick Ghatak, Sen is considered one of the trio of great Indian filmmakers both domestically and internationally.

Film Bored with the inadequacy of contemporary Bengali literature as well as his erstwhile favourite authors, Sen came across a short story by Sadat Hasan Manto, possibly the greatest Urdu short story writer. The story, titled "Kingdom's End" ("Badshahat Ka Khatmah", 1949), is about a vagabond who's invited to guard his friend's office. He unexpectedly receives a call one day from a stranger lady, but he develops tuberculosis and dies just as the woman was about to give him her phone number. This morbid romanticism wasn't Sen's style, so he chose to end with a different kind of flourish—the man and woman meet, but the woman doesn't let him recognize her. The emotional and psychological backbone of the film is however Rabindranath Tagore's short story "The Hungry Stones" ("Khudhito Paashan", 1895), where the ghost of a young woman, kidnapped and sold into the sex trade centuries ago, haunts a tax collector and wants him to free her from eternal bondage. The story is referenced many times and the unnamed hero even ponders, Hamlet-like, on his inability to help the unnamed heroine. The woman in the film is also mistress to a man who has lost interest in her as

she kept rejecting his advances; some abuse is definitely hinted at, too. As such, the parallel with Tagore's story is again unmissable. Sen even had the actor Anjan Dutt grow out his hair and captured him from some angles that made him resemble a young Tagore.

Background Rabindranath Tagore and Sadat Hasan Manto's work are as different as chalk and cheese— only Mrinal Sen's genius could have brought them together. However, the slow pace, exclusive focus on psychological development with practically no event of any significance and overt expectations for the audience to be familiar with the short stories acted as a detriment. A few loose ends, like the unnecessary character of the servant boy Nobo and the writer's now-considerate attitude towards him and the mystery of the Queen Mother's room, didn't help either. The film was unpopular commercially and otherwise. It was not accepted at Cannes and some other major festivals, and it did not win an award at the San Sebastian festival where it was entered. It only won a single National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Bengali (1993).

SYNOPSIS

An unnamed writer is invited by a friend to house-sit his once majestic, now dilapidated mansion in the middle-of-nowhere. The mansion caretaker Banamali, an older man, shows him around and then leaves. The writer, now alone in the house with cockroaches, lizards and perhaps, ghosts, suddenly receives a call from a stranger late at night. It's a woman who doesn't identify herself. They speak over the phone several times and the writer begins to wait for her call, but she is inconsistent. They discuss Tagore's story, "The Hungry Stones", several times. We see snippets of her lonely life with a nagging, inquisitive maid as her sole companion. In one emotional conversation, the woman tells the writer her story of being used by a man for the sake of her family, from both of whom she's now estranged. The writer, ever in search of a story, gets piqued. His focus is disturbed by Banamali's grandson Nobo, who the old caretaker brings to take care of the writer's needs. The woman finally decides to visit her family but finds that they have moved on without her— they only ask her to come and visit instead of living with them again. The man who is "keeping" the woman as his mistress offers her the choice of vacating the apartment or becoming a full-blown prostitute. Anxious, frustrated and angry, the woman gives the writer her phone number, but he never ends up calling her, as he doesn't know if or how he can help. He does ask to meet her but she refuses. Finally, he decides to leave the mansion and return to the city after trying to call her one last time. But she has already left the apartment. On the train ride back, they meet by chance and he speaks to her as she's getting off the train. But she doesn't speak and he, never realizing that he had just met and missed the woman of his dreams, continues on his train ride.

CHARACTERS

| | |
|------------|---|
| The Writer | played by Anjan Dutt |
| The Woman | played by Dimple Kapadia |
| Banamali | the house caretaker |
| Nobo | Banamali's grandson |
| Saheb | The man who keeps the woman as his mistress |

(Saheb here is a generic form of address for master or husband)
The woman's maid, parents and younger sister are all unnamed.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

The Writer

The hero of this film remains unnamed. He is a bit of a happy-go-lucky writer forever in search of stories, but his life would never be the same after his telephonic encounter with the woman.

Adventurous The Writer is flexible and open to new experiences. He doesn't hesitate, after receiving a letter from an old friend with whom he had fallen out of touch, to house-sit for him for some time. He just packs up and travels overnight by train to a now-crumbling but once-majestic mansion full of cockroaches, lizards and secrets.

Supportive Aside from his unquestioning support towards his friend's need for a house-sitter the writer also supports the woman when she calls out of the blue. He is an empathetic listener to her usually disjointed attempts at communication. He advises her about rekindling her relationship with her family and does not get offended when she says that she was used to calling up strangers, implying that he wasn't someone special.

Insightful From the few clues that the woman drops about her life and circumstances, the writer is able to insightfully deduce that she lives in a well-appointed, lavish apartment with a phone, a clock on the night stand etc. and that she's a lonely insomniac. From her enthusiasm for Tagore's short story, he intuits that she is exploited and stuck in a loveless situation which parallels the courtesan ghost's story- she wants to be heard and known by a stranger, perhaps also rescued.

Coward The writer is strongly attracted to the woman— he waits for her calls, gets frustrated and anxious about her silence and even asks to meet with her. Despite that, he is also cowardly in his lack of confidence to make a difference to her life; just like the tax collector protagonist from Tagore's story, he feels helpless to rescue her from her suffering. That is also why he never calls her. And when he does, it is too late. We are left to wonder how he would have reacted had the woman acknowledged him on the train.

The Woman

Coy The woman's behaviour can be best described as being coy and somewhat disordered, as if impersonating a *femme fatale* — she leads the writer on without giving him any kind of satisfaction, keeping him guessing and on his toes expecting a call from her. Even at the end, she could have easily revealed her identity but chooses not to do so. Perhaps because of the constant rejection that the woman has faced, she has learned to hide her true emotions, or maybe she herself is confused as to what she actually feels. But her coyness doesn't appear to be deliberately malicious.

Lonely Apart from her nagging, inquisitive maid who seems to have little sympathy for her emotions, the woman has no companions. She is lonely and also estranged from her birth family. It's curious how she is invested in knowing if the mother from Tagore's story tried to find the kidnapped daughter; only later we understand that it's the loneliness to be separated from her mother and wondering if the latter cared for her. So deep is the woman's loneliness that she depends on strangers to assuage it. Her lifeline is actually the telephone, which she uses to call up random numbers late at night, but no one before the writer had expressed interest in her as a person.

Exploited Although we are not shown any scenes of abuse on-screen, it's fairly certain that some mental, if not physical, abuse must have happened in the past for the woman to end up in her peculiar circumstances. This is indicated by when she has a nightmare and wakes up screaming. When we first see her, her angst-ridden demeanour, unkempt appearance and modest white printed saris suggest a state of mourning, as if she has just escaped from an abusive situation and is recuperating with the help of her maid. The maid even encourages her to go out and socialize with her friends and meet up with her family. But slowly we realize that the very apartment that appears to be a refuge is actually a prison.

Caring Even though her family easily sacrificed her to be a mistress to a rich man for his help in financially supporting them, she continues to care for them while estranged and holding a grudge. But finally when the woman takes the plunge and visits, she realizes that there is no place for her left in that household, especially as she would be coming empty-handed; only her terminally ill father asks her repeatedly to visit. Her inherently caring nature may also be why she chooses not to reveal herself to the writer. She perhaps didn't want to be a burden on him or place him in an uncomfortable situation.

THEMES

Mystery The writer is ever in search of stories and mysteries— the chance to house-sit at his friend's ancestral mansion was naturally bait for him. That mystery is teased in the still-majestic and impeccably maintained Queen Mother's room which remains locked except for showing visitors and has its doors mysteriously open one night— but the film fails to follow up on the loose end or tie it back to "The Hungry Stones" motif. The writer doesn't seem to be very sociable and his personal life is completely shrouded in mystery, which the film sees no need to untangle as he represents the garden variety Bengali intellectual of the time— smoking cigarettes, drinking tea and brooding heavily no matter the situation. However, and as to be expected, the woman shrouds herself in layers of mystery throughout the few days of communication with the writer. Sometimes flatly and sometimes tearfully, she denies the writer's advances and insights about her life. She is often shown supine on her bed or alone on her verandah with an angst-filled expression on her face— we cannot but wonder why she is so disturbed and what she's thinking about.

Boredom On the surface, her life seems picture-perfect and a little odd at the same time. The

woman, an unmarried young Bengali woman lives by herself in a well-appointed apartment, has a live-in maid who sometimes mentions her “saheb” (which could be husband or master), has no children and does not seem to work for a living. We don’t see her reading or watching television or performing any household chores and are left wondering what she does with all her time. She is clearly bored on the surface, but inside, she is sad, frustrated, helpless and often angry. Only gradually is it hinted at that she is a rich man’s mistress and agreed to have an extramarital relationship with him in exchange for him financially helping her family. At first, things went well; but later on, either he loses interest or she feels used and guilty, also possibly abused, and draws away from him. Things come to a head when he asks her over the phone (in a conversation that we can only hear the woman’s side of) to either become a full-blown prostitute, perhaps servicing his friends, or vacate the apartment. Having no other recourse, she makes the difficult choice to visit her family, where her reception is only lukewarm. Regardless, she then moves out of her prison-like apartment to an unknown destination, instead of continuing to be in that state of mental anguish. As for the writer, he was also leading a humdrum, boring life until he arrives at the mansion and even after that he finds few things to occupy himself with, until he receives an unexpected phone call.

Strangers The film revolves around the idea (from Manto’s short story) that we are our most authentic selves in the presence of strangers— there is no shame or fear of gossip or retribution if we can share our mental load with someone whom we will likely never meet or speak to again in our lifetimes. On top of the boredom and insomnia, the woman is forever in search of a sympathetic shoulder to lean on, which none of her near and dear ones can offer her. So she calls random phone numbers late at night, but most of the recipients reject her or think her mentally unstable. This is actually interesting and unexpected, as one would think a mysterious and very attractive-sounding woman calling late at night would receive some indecent proposals from some men at the least— but the woman doesn’t mention that. And in any case, this communication is tenuous and one-sided, as the person who receives the call has no way to call the woman back in the age of rotary phones and no caller identification.

As for the writer, he doesn’t seem to have any close relationships and treats everyone like a stranger, be it his old friend Dilip, or the house caretaker, Banamali, and his grandson Nobo. In fact, he gets annoyed at Nobo’s attempts to socialize and only indulges the boy a single time. After getting a call from a mysterious woman, he is puzzled and surprised, but soon gets sucked into the bittersweet anticipation of waiting for her call.

Attraction Physical proximity is usually the biggest factor in the development of romantic attraction; however, in this film proximity is more emotional and psychological rather than being location-dependent. The telephone lines literally weave a string of nebulous connection between these two lonely souls. The woman keeps herself mysterious, usually speaking in connotations and riddles and expecting the writer to read between the lines. She also sends mixed signals and isn’t upfront and honest with the writer, for all his empathy and genuine interest in her, perhaps because she is afraid to land up in an even worse situation that she already is in. The writer, on the other hand, like a typical Bengali *bhadralok* (gentleman) intellectual, prefers to speak in borrowed metaphors from Tagore. Like many middle-class Bengali men, the writer too suffers to a great degree from frustrated, unmet sexual urges but he has no socially acceptable way to express these. So he internalizes his desires instead and wonders at his own emasculation and lack of agency— again typical of his class. He never openly expresses his desire to meet her until the very end. But that last act perhaps scares her off, as she doesn’t identify herself when they meet by chance on the train. He helps her get off at her station with her luggage as a gentleman would, never guessing it was the woman with whom he had such heart-wrenching conversations.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1) This is yet another film in which Sen explores an unconventional female lead. Discuss the woman’s peculiar circumstances and how those may have set her apart from most of her contemporaries.
- 2) Reference to Tagore’s “The Hungry Stones” recurs throughout the film. Does knowing (or not knowing) the story help you understand what’s going on? How so? Discuss.
- 3) Analyse the sequence in which the woman visits her family. What did you think about their reaction? Why does the woman leave suddenly?
- 4) Did you think this was a romance waiting to happen or just ships passing each other in the night? Discuss.

5) Why do you think the woman doesn't let the writer know that she was the one he was speaking to?

6) If you were in the writer or the woman's shoes, what would you have done? Discuss.

SCENES

An offer to house-sit A writer who we only see from the back, reads from a letter that a friend has sent him, offering the writer a chance to house-sit for him and enticing him with stories of his old mansion. The writer travels there by train and is greeted by the house caretaker, Banamali, an unkempt man in his 60's. Banamali jokes that his master said that the writer "drinks tea even while asleep" as he enters through a tiny cut-out gate in a larger gate resembling a fortress entrance. He then opens the large gate.



The mansion We see tall pillars with rib-like bricks exposed, long corridors. Banamali shows the writer the Queen Mother's still-majestic room. She was a strong and determined woman who even won litigations with the British single-handedly. The writer is shown into a different room as the clock strikes a late hour.



The writer's lonely night The writer sits at a desk, smoking, flicking lights on and off, then writing. In a voiceover, he says that Banamali organized the bare necessities and left, saying that he would check in after a few days. The writer is now alone in the house. He has been to many places, but never seen such strange desolation and pervasive emptiness, though there is commotion right outside the threshold. There are lizards, cockroaches and even ghosts, apparently. He doesn't believe in the supernatural but is smelling a mystery here.



The phone rings The rotary landline phone rings unexpectedly, but the call gets disconnected. The writer sits down by the phone. A cat meows. The phone rings and disconnects again. A woman lies on her bed looking mysterious and sad while dialling a new red rotary phone and looking at the camera.

A second call The next morning, the writer makes tea on an electric stove and receives a call from a woman, who suddenly starts talking about the rainy weather. The writer, baffled, asks who she wants to speak to. She appears flustered, but tells him to not hang up. The woman says she wants to talk to someone, anyone, the writer. The writer's interest is piqued. She admits to calling the number last night. The writer checks on the kettle and pours himself a cup of tea— but the call has disconnected in the meantime.



The third call At night the writer waits while relaxing, while a strong wind blows all the paper he had written on off his desk. He doesn't retrieve them. The phone rings. It's the woman again. She asks how he knew she would call, but the writer says that no one else would call him there at the palace. He explains that he's house-sitting a supposedly haunted mansion for his friend and his bones are still all intact.



The Hungry Stones He's not afraid, but searching for "Khudhito Paashan" ("The Hungry Stones"). They discuss the Tagore story of an abandoned palace in the wilderness where sighs of a courtesan murdered horribly centuries ago still sound in the air. She correctly guesses that he's a writer and asks him to write about her. The mood is broken by a cockroach falling on the writer; she also gets scared. She asks him why he didn't ask about who she is. She turns off the light and hangs up in the middle of the call.



The mansion, again The writer explores the dilapidated mansion, with a still impressive courtyard surrounded by many great doors. Later, he reads "The Hungry Stones" short story from the book, lying on bed. The door to the queen's room is mysteriously open; the writer thinks it's Banamali but we don't see the caretaker.



Another late-night call The woman wakes up from a nightmare, screaming “Help! Help!” Her maid, checking in, tells her to go back to sleep. An ambulance siren shatters the night. The phone rings in the writer’s house. She apologizes for waking him in the middle of the night. He tells her the correct time and teases her about not finding anyone else to call and her absurd timing. He’s not annoyed, but he cannot understand her. She asks what he thinks of her.

The writer guesses about the woman’s circumstances The writer says that she lives in a well-appointed, cosy apartment with a phone, a clock on the nightstand etc. — guessing from obvious cues— and that she has insomnia and no one to talk to. She wants to be heard and known by a stranger as she’s completely torn up inside. She’s very alone. She starts sobbing a little and denies that she was listening to him, begging him to stop. Later, she keeps the phone off the hook. The writer wonders who this mysterious woman is, comparing her to the woman from “The Hungry Stones” who was abducted as a child by Bedouin thieves and finally ended up in a king’s harem.

The maid’s advice The woman takes an elevator to the terrace of her high-rise apartment where her maid is watering the plants. The maid tells her to stop isolating herself and go out and socialize. The woman’s mother is still alive; she should go to her at least. She says that everyone knows why the woman’s *saheb* (master) left and never returned; he thinks throwing money at everyone will make his absence acceptable. She insists that the woman visit her mother. The woman, shocked, walks away.



Banamali arrives with Nobo Banamali, checking in, makes tea for the writer and tells a young boy to serve tea to the writer in a glass instead of a cup. It’s Banamali’s grandson, Nobo, whom he brought from the village for running odd errands for the writer. The writer says that it wasn’t necessary. Nobo says that he can boil eggs. The writer agrees to let Nobo stay on Banamali’s insistence, in case of accidents and such. The writer tells Banamali that Nobo should sleep in the caretaker’s room, not on the open verandah. Banamali says that Nobo is familiar with the house and available round the clock. When the writer leaves, Banamali tells Nobo to keep his distance from the writer as he prefers his own company.



Thwarted communication The phone rings again in the middle of the night. The writer picks up the phone and asks who's calling, then shouts and bangs on the phone for a response. But nobody answers and the call gets disconnected. The writer notices Nobo hiding behind the door and asks what he's doing there, telling him to go and sleep. After the writer goes into his own room, Nobo slowly approaches the phone and fiddles with it. The writer, coming out, asks if Nobo is afraid but the boy laughs it away. On the other end, the woman lays on the bed with the phone on her stomach, picking up the receiver and putting it back again; finally, she turns the light off and tries to sleep.

Waiting In a voiceover, the writer says that the phone has been silent for the last three days and he has been anxiously waiting for a call which never came. He has only pondered for the last three days. We see the room with the phone in it with the lights turning on and off, indicating the passage of time. Suddenly, the phone rings and the writer literally comes running and receives the call. The woman is lying on the bed, laughing and answering the writer.

Hesitation The writer asks what happened the other day and why she didn't reply. She has no answer. He says that he is very confused. She responds that she thought she would be able to tell him something but hesitated. She circles back to "The Hungry Stones" and asks if the woman from the story tried to search for her daughter after she was abducted by the Bedouin thieves, but the writer says that Tagore had left no information on the matter.



A story The woman says that she knew someone, an oldest daughter, who didn't have to be stolen; she was actually pushed away by her mother. The oldest daughter became responsible for the family and her younger siblings when they fell on hard times; she often wished they could die by poisoning and end it all. However, they were rescued by a large-hearted, rich man who took responsibility for the family and the older daughter. The mother thought the family would finally be safe. But slowly the man revealed his true colours. The mother called and wrote to her daughter, shared her pain and assured her that the man wouldn't find a place even in Hell. The writer asks if the daughter ever thinks of her mother. The woman tearfully repeats, "No, never" and hangs up.

Nobo and the writer

Nobo peeks in to the writer's room and asks what kind of stories he writes and if he was arguing with a ghost on the phone. The writer tells him not to come upstairs if he hears him on the phone. Torrential rains pour down. Nobo wakes up the writer who had fallen asleep at his desk. The writer immediately runs to check on the phone.



The woman is angry The woman's maid complains about the rain. Her *saheb* calls, but she doesn't receive it. The maid says he was very angry. The woman also gets angry and goes out into the terrace in the storm, but soon comes inside in a huff and calls the writer. She gives him her telephone number then abruptly hangs up. The writer reads a passage from "The Hungry Stones" about the woman ghost's pleas to be rescued and the protagonist's inability to do so. He dials her number but hangs up before the call connects. The woman waits for his call. The woman's phone rings, but it's her *saheb*. We hear a one-sided conversation where she refuses to be demeaned any further.



The woman visits her family The woman's maid knocks on her door but she's not at home. The writer asks Nobo when his master will return but Nobo doesn't know. The woman arrives at her mother's house, much to the surprise of her mother and youngest sister. The woman says that they look well. The youngest sister gives the woman news about the two middle sisters who are studying in college and her brother who just got a promotion at his job. Her mother says that the woman's father is doing well despite his terminal condition. He asks her if she would come again and she tearfully agrees to do so. Then she leaves abruptly.



Rejection The writer waits by the phone for a while, but hesitates to pick up when it rings. Finally, when he picks up, the woman apologizes for bothering him. The writer is happy that she visited her parents. The maid eavesdrops. She tells the writer than she's confident that the family will be financially stable now. She has packed her bags. The writer asks if he could meet her. The woman confesses that she would call random strangers at night when she couldn't sleep, like an addiction. Some strangers would be annoyed, some would make fun of her, but the writer only asked for her story. The writer asks her why she gave him her phone number or told him about visiting her parents. He asks to meet her again. But she flatly refuses. He hangs up slowly.



Ships in the night The writer packs up his bags even though Banamali asks him to stay. But the writer keeps waiting for a while and hesitating. The woman's red phone rings but no one picks up. The writer, travelling in a moving train, thinks how the hero could have rescued the ghost from the "The Hungry Stones. The train stops at a station and the writer calls to a tea vendor. The woman, also in the same train compartment, hears his voice. She is about to get off the train at that station. He notices her and tells her to get off as the train would leave right away. He helps get her luggage down to the platform. She looks at him but doesn't say anything. The writer resumes his train journey. End credits roll.

